

How do I act around Swami Nirmalananda?

You might be wondering about some of the yogic traditions and want to know what you should be doing. Some of them can be confusing or even scary. Here's what to do – and why.

Nirmalananda's chair

We are now providing a chair for Swami Nirmalananda to sit in when she is giving talks or leading us in a discussion. When she is teaching poses, she will demonstrate them on the floor or on a teaching platform. For chanting, she may be on the floor or a platform with the harmonium, or we may place it on a table so she can lead the chant from her chair.

From a practical perspective, having Nirmalaji sit in a chair makes her able to see us more easily. She describes, "I vary my teaching depending on who is in the room, as well as how they are taking in the information. I can see this in the way they are sitting, the look on their face, how deep their eyes are, how they are breathing, and many other things. I am able to customize the teachings to your needs when I can see you better."

We are also better able to see her, which is great fun, especially when she is telling the traditional teaching stories. She takes on the character of each person in the story which enriches it significantly. Plus, for some of us the chance to watch her, as well as to hear her, is a great pleasure. The telephone courses make her accessible to us wherever we live, but spending time with her personally has always been a great pleasure.

Most importantly, the tradition of placing the teacher on a higher seat honors the teaching itself. Nirmalananda's recent initiation as a Swami has had an effect on her and is for our benefit. There would be no reason for her to take that initiation if it didn't have an effect. For her students, the most important part of that effect is that she serves as a conduit for the stream of yogic blessings to flow. She describes it this way;

All of the *Svaroopa*[®] yoga practices are about removing the inner obstacles to knowing who you are. These practices are based in the ancient tradition of Kashmiri Shaivism, and enlivened by the grace I continue to receive from my Guru and gurus. I have devoted my adult life to removing of these inner obstacles. My recent fire ceremony and immersion in the river propelled the process along. I am tremendously grateful for this.

This means that I can continue to serve you as I always have, as a disciple of my Guru, by sharing the teachings as well as being a channel for the grace. Just as a riverbed is valuable only when the water is flowing through it, a teacher offers the most when she gets herself out of the way and allows the grace to flow through her.

Placing me on a teaching seat is a way of honoring that flow of shakti (energy), which is the energy of love-absolute, as well as the true form of the Guru, and the energy that enlivens the *mantra*. It is the magnetic force that pulls you into yourself and brings you home – to the knowing of your own being. I sit on the seat in order to honor that flow to which I have given my whole life.

Talking with Swamiji privately when she is seated in the chair may feel awkward in the beginning. You may stand or you may sit on the floor or platform where the chair is placed. Whenever possible, she will have a couple of folding chairs nearby so that you can sit while speaking with her, so your heads may be more level with each other, which makes it easier to talk. If there is no chair next to her, feel free to bring one over. She'll show you where to place it.

Talking to Nirmalananda

The official protocol is this – say, “Hi.” Then follow up with anything else you wanted to say. No question or subject matter is off limits for Nirmalaji

What do I call her?

Swamiji wrote this about how pronounce her name:

nir (near) – Even though it sounds like the English word “near,” it means “without” or to be “free from.”

ma (muh) – say it like you are going to say “mud,” but leave off the d. Technically, it is a short a in Sanskrit, but it sounds like the u in mud.

la – this is like you are singing the scales: do re mi fa so la... in Sanskrit, this is a long a, which is held longer than the short a and has a slightly different sound.

Together, it means nir (without) mala (contraction) – beyond the three malas. Those of you who have taken the weekend workshop, “Beyond Your Limitations,” already know what the three malas are. I will be teaching more about them in the next few months.

When you end on the “la,” you already have the beginning of the next part, “aananda.” So you can leave off the first a, and just say:

nan – this is Sanskrit with another short a, like you are saying “nun” (like a Catholic nun)

da – another short a, almost like “duh,” only shorter.

All together, it is like this:

Nirmalananda: Near-mula-nunduh

I know that is a mouthful. So I respond to nicknames:

Nirmalaji – the “ji” (pronounced “gee”) on the end of a name is a way of indicating both love and respect

Nirmala Swami

Swamiji – but there are lots of us called “Swamiji” in America, so you’ll need to be able to distinguish me among them.

Swami – short and easy!

Of course, I will respond if you mispronounce it! I might even laugh and help you with it. We can laugh together.

Hugging Swamiji

Please do not hug Swami Nirmalananda. There is a practical side to this request, as well as a teaching – as there always is with Swamiji. It is physically demanding for her to hug 20 or 60 people, which has happened many times in the past.

There are many teachers and gurus who specialize in hugging everyone who comes to them. It is a perfect way for them to teach, but it is not Swamiji’s approach. This does not mean that she doesn’t love you, or that she is not delighted to see you. You will be able to see and feel her love for you without getting a hug. She also knows it is sometimes hard for you to leave and go home and that you want to express that. What this means is that her love (and, hopefully, your love) must be expressed in a different way. Nirmalananda describes it this way:

When people hug, they shut off the flow of love. Up until the moment they hug, their eyes are shining with love. Then they wrap their arms around each other and let some parts of their bodies touch. In that moment, their eyes stop shining. They are not feeling it any more. They have expressed it, so they are not feeling it any more. Yoga is the science of feeling, so you must cultivate your experience of loving and being loved – don't shut it down with a hug!

What do you do instead? Swamiji has asked that you simply place one or both of your hands on your own heart. If you want to place your palms together in Anjali Mudra, also known as the Namaste position, she appreciates it and will probably return it. But you might be holding something in one hand, so you can just touch your heart with your other hand or a few fingers.

Sometimes both hands are full, or you don't even think of touching your heart. Please know that she sees the love shining through your eyes and through your smile. She promises that, when you do this, you will step away from her still basking in your own experience of love.

Of course, every rule is meant to be broken. Probably the one who will break it most often is Nirmalananda!

Meeting her for the first time

Please introduce yourself and shake her hand! There are no other formalities.

She wants to meet you. She'll also want to know where you live and if you have a *Svaroopā*[®] yoga teacher, or if you have been practicing another style of asana practice, or if you are new to yoga. Anything else that you want to share or to ask is also welcome, but please be aware if other people are waiting their turn to talk with her.

Bowing

Please do not bow to Swamiji. She has asked that you do not bow to her, whether she is seated or standing. Bowing is an important tradition in yoga, fully understood and accepted in India, where children bow to their mother and father every morning. In America, it can be misunderstood to be an act of submission or a statement that she is greater than you. Remember, you are consciousness, too!

Yet bowing is a way of expressing your intention to surrender to the consciousness that you are. If you ever have the opportunity to see Nirmalananda when she visits the home of her Guru, you will see her lie prostrate on the floor in front of his seat for a long time. She has given herself completely to that flow of grace, and her bow is an act of total surrender.

If you feel moved to offer a bow for any reason, Nirmalananda asks that you bow to her Guru. She has a photo of Swami Muktananda on the table next to her seat. There is also a *puja* table (altar) at the back of the room, where she can see Bhagavan Nityananda while she teaches. In Malvern we have his *murti* (enlivened statue), and she will have his photo when she is traveling.

You may stand in front of either of them and pause for a moment to dip your head down, perhaps with your hands at your heart. You may even want to kneel in front or lower your head to the floor, which is a wonderful way of placing your head below your heart. Be sure to look back at the photo or *murti* once you complete your bow – sometimes they wink!

You may also bow to the teaching chair when Nirmalaji is not seated in it. The chair itself is a riverbed, through which the grace flows. Your bow is a way to immerse your head in the river of grace, plus it reinforces its flow when Nirmalaji is not seated there.

Receiving blessings

One of Nirmalananda's appointed tasks as a swami is to give blessings. She has spoken about this in the past, and every Level 4 completion ceremony has a part where the new teachers give blessings to the world.

She gives these blessings in many different ways, but most often by saying Om Namah Shivaya. This mantra transmits the love and power of her lineage, and is a way of acknowledging the divinity on both the inside and outside. If you hear her saying Om Namah Shivaya to you, you may respond with the same or you may want to simply remain quiet and let it soak in.

She also may reach out to touch your hand or arm. She may even touch your heart lightly or reach out to your face or head, respectfully – if she feels you will be OK with it.

Touching her feet

The energy that contracts to manifest as a human being flows from the top of your body to the bottom (your feet). This means that the energy flowing through your head is more expanded and radiant, and it gets more contracted and polluted as it moves down through your body. When you are free from the inner obstacles, the energy flowing through you is not polluted – it is even magnified by the power of your practices and your expanded understanding. This is true of you and it is true of Nirmalanandaji. This is the reason that the Guru's feet and Guru's sandals are so revered in the yoga tradition. This is also why the student never extends her/his legs and feet toward the teacher.

Swami Nirmalananda tells this story:

When I first encountered the tradition of honoring the Guru's feet, I was a little put off by it. Then I thought of Martha washing Jesus' feet with fragrant oil. Still I didn't understand it until a memorable visit to my parents. My mother was helping a charitable organization plan a Halloween event, so we worked together to build a scarecrow. After getting the straw stuffed into the clothes and a plastic pumpkin for the head, we needed shoes. She went into the attic and pulled out an old pair of my father's shoes – a pair he had worn for years when watering the garden. They were crusty and stiff. As she brought them into the room, I was flooded with memories of watching him lovingly tend his many beautiful plants. It was like I was standing there with him again; his presence was held in his shoes. The funny thing about it was that he was outside watering the garden, while we were doing this inside. It was like I had two of him. I have loved the Guru's sandals ever since!

What does all of this mean? It means these Indian traditions are very rich and fulfilling once you understand them, yet there are many who can be put off or scared by them. Out of respect to those students who would be disturbed by this tradition, we ask that you do not touch Swamiji's feet.

Also, please do not extend your legs out in front of you while you are with her. You can turn sideways and extend your feet toward the side of the room for a few minutes, and then fold them into a nice yogic sitting pose again. Here's a simple summary:

- Do not touch Nirmalananda's feet in public. This is a way of being respectful to the others in the room.
- You may "take the dust" from the floor under her chair when she is not in the room. This means you touch the place where her feet have been, as though your fingers are getting

dusty, and then touch your fingers to one of three places on your own body: to the top of your head, to the space between your eyebrows, or to your heart.

- You may “take the dust” from the photos and/or *murtis* of Swami Muktananda and Bhagavan Nityananda.
- Do not extend your legs and feet toward Nirmalananda, nor toward the *puja* at the back of the room.
- If you need to change your seated position, please consider sitting in a chair, which you may move to at any time. Being comfortable while she is teaching is a valuable way of increasing the benefit you get. If you need to extend your legs for a few minutes, simply turn sideways and extend your legs toward the side of the room.
- In Shavasana and other poses, please do not point your legs and feet toward the teaching chair or toward the *puja* at the back of the room. This is easy to manage by simply turning at a slight angle.

With all this stuff going on, is Swami Nirmalananda a Guru?

The word Guru is a scary word for most westerners. The first thing to understand about it is that its meaning is, “teacher.” If you had a piano teacher when you were a child, you had a piano guru. In this way, Nirmalananda has been a teacher for many decades.

Yet, “guru” is a Sanskrit word with a greater meaning, especially in the context of yoga practices. It really refers to a spiritual teacher. In this way, Nirmalananda has been serving us for a long time. She has now received an initiation to make her even more effective in this role. She has been appointed within her lineage to serve us through her teaching.

However, that acknowledgement and empowerment within her tradition is only half of the process. You can think of this appointment, by those in the tradition, as being “from the top down.” The other half of the process is the appointment comes from those who are following her on the path – “from the bottom up.” In other words, you decide.

Nirmalananda explained it this way earlier:

You must evaluate the state of a teacher, by assessing their effect on you. In Sanskrit, teacher is “guru.” That is spelled g-u-r-u, which is, “Gee, you are you!” In other words, when you study with a teacher, if your focus is on the teacher, you are missing the point – or the teacher is not guiding you correctly. When you are with a teacher who is moving you toward your own Self, your focus will be on your own experience, not your experience of the teacher, but your experience of yourself. There are two additional signs that your teacher is serving you in your upliftment – either you experience profound inner experiences in their presence, or your buttons are pushed and you get very reactive. I am happy to do either for you whenever I can.

You can enjoy Swamiji’s teachings without making any commitments to her or considering her to be a Guru. You decide how much you want to do, how much you want to give, and how much you want to get. If you decide to give more, just like anything else in life, you always get more. If you want to try her out as your teacher (as your Guru), you decide. You don’t even have to have a conversation with her. You just make a decision to give this relationship a try. You appoint her as your Guru.

If it doesn't work out for you, you simply fire her. There are no contracts, nothing to sign and nothing to fulfill. Like any relationship, you can be in or you can get out. She says it this way, "I will continue to serve you for as long as you would like for me to, and I will do so the fullest of my ability..."

How to get the most

Simply do what is most comfortable for you. You don't have to try to follow any of the traditions explained above! Perhaps you can think of it this way – be respectful and kind. Nirmalananda is still a person, though her focus is you (instead of herself).

In a course with a teaching team (several Teacher Trainers), the other Trainers will tell you in advance when Nirmalananda will be joining you. They will ask you to arrive a few minutes early so that everyone is ready when she arrives.

It will also help if you set your seated pose up properly. Use a chair or other props to make yourself comfortable and have your spine easily upright. This opens your body, mind and heart, and makes you most able to hear and retain whatever Swamiji is offering.

Actually, being ready, properly seated, when class is to begin is a way to honor the teachings. Preparing for Master Yoga's Teacher Trainers by arriving a few minutes early and setting up your seat means that everyone will get more. The teachings can be given at a greater depth when everyone is prepared to receive them.

Opening mantras

We have always begun our teachings with the *Ganesh* mantras, as a way of invoking the inner opening and the flow of grace. Nirmalananda will now be chanting some additional mantras, honoring her guru and lineage. You will get a handout with these mantras and are invited to chant along.

Above all, please remember that Swamiji tends toward informality. She will not take offense if you forget any of this. It's nice when you help each other understand how to honor the teachings and grace flowing through her, but it is not about "right" and "wrong." This means that you can be kind to people who don't know the traditions or are in reaction to them.

If you are sincere in your desire to learn as well as to have inner experiences, or if you want her help with something in your body or in your life, Swamiji doesn't care how you communicate with her or how you do things. Just say, "Hi," and start talking.